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THE EARLY SENTIMENTAL DRAMAS OF RICHARD CUMBERLAND

1761-1778: *The Banishment of Cicero*; *The Summer's Tale*; *Amelia*; *The Brothers*; *Timon of Athens*; *The Fashionable Lover*; *The Note of Hand*; *The Cholerick Man*; *The Battle of Hastings*; *The Princess of Parma*.

Richard Cumberland, the dramatist, speaks in his *Memoirs* of his plays as "a long list of dramas, such as I presume no English author has yet equalled *in point of number*." This is a statement disingenuous enough, unless we suppose Cumberland ignorant of the prolific Elizabethans, Marston, Decker, and Heywood. The dramatist is equally pompous, but more truthful when he says, later: "When I attempt to look into the mass of my productions, I can keep no order in the enumeration of them; I have not patience to arrange them according to their dates: I believe I have written at least fifty dramas published and unpublished."

Cumberland's carelessness in losing sight of his dramas has rendered a complete collection of them difficult. He himself in the *Memoirs* indexes thirty-eight dramatic pieces; Genest assigns him forty-three; *Biographia Dramatica* credits him with fifty-four; and a student more patient than the author himself may record others. Neither of the two dramatic dictionaries makes mention of a play called *The Confession*, printed in a collection of plays called *The Posthumous Dramatic Works of Richard Cumberland*. Three other plays may be attributed to Cumberland upon more or less reputable authority.¹

The Banishment of Cicero, written about 1761, and concerned with the conspiracy of Clodius, Piso, and Gabinius against Tully, never found an audience, save David Garrick, whose friendship for Cumberland began at this time. *Biographia Dramatica* finds the unpleasant scenes "too vicious and shocking to come within the decent clothing of tragic muse."²

¹ *The Elders*, a farce acted at Kelmars, Northamptonshire; *The Days of Geri*, in a list compiled by Sir Walter Scott; *Palamon and Arcite*, in manuscript form in the British Museum.

² *Biographia Dramatica*, III, 47.

In 1765 Cumberland ventured into a dramatic field for which he was totally unfitted. On December 6, an operetta, *The Summer's Tale*, with music by Abel, Bach, and Arne was produced at Covent Garden Theatre. The piece had a run of nine nights.³ The play was judged a failure by the critics, but Cumberland brought it forward three years later under another name; it was altered, and acted as *Amelia* at Covent Garden on April 12, 1768. The piece was again acted, with alterations, on December 14, 1771, at Drury Lane Theatre. Mudford, in his *Life of Cumberland*, asserts that *Amelia* is a convincing proof of the dramatist's unwillingness to admit any play of his to be a failure.

On December 2, 1769, at Covent Garden Theatre, was acted *The Brothers*. "It was written," Cumberland affirms, "after my desultory manner, at such short periods of time and leisure as I could snatch from business or the society of my family. . . Neither was it any interruption, if my children were playing about me in the room."⁴ The comedy was probably finished early in 1768, for a letter of March 21 of this year to Garrick can hardly refer to another play: "I have," says Cumberland, "a comedy in my possession which has never been in any hands but my own, and is, both in plot and execution, entirely new and original."⁵ The offer was apparently refused, but the comedy was subsequently accepted by Covent Garden Theatre. Cumberland's happiest inspiration in the writing of *The Brothers* was a passage in the epilogue which won for him the friendship of Garrick. The play was acted about twenty-two times, and enjoyed many revivals. The popularity of *The Brothers*⁶ secured for Cumberland the patronage

³ Further comment upon *The Summer's Tale* may be found in *The Gentleman's Magazine* for December, 1765, *The Universal Magazine* for December, 1765, *The Universal Museum* for December, 1765, *The London Magazine* for December, 1765, and *The Royal Magazine* for December, 1765. All these periodicals contain specimens of the lyrics of the musical comedy.

⁴ *Memoirs*, I, 264. Cumberland has a tendency to emphasize his casual method of composition. See Mudford, *Life of Cumberland*, p. 188.

⁵ *Private Correspondence of David Garrick*, I, 293. Cumberland to Garrick, March 21, 1768.

⁶ A version of *The Brothers* in prose may be found in Miss Macauley's *Tales of the Drama*, p. 239. *The Brothers* was not at first definitely known to be Cumberland's.

The Whitehall Evening Post of December 4, 1769, says: "Notwithstanding some reports to the contrary, we can assure our readers that the new

and protection of Garrick, and definitely established him as a writer of "legitimate comedy." Its success gave ihm courage to begin *The West Indian*. *The West Indian*, acted on January 19, 1771, has been discussed in an earlier issue of this periodical.

The same year which brought forth *The West Indian* offered the first of Cumberland's adaptations of Shakespeare. *Timon of Athens* was acted at Drury Lane on December 4, 1771. This play was followed on January 20, 1772, at the same playhouse, by *The Fashionable Lover*. This production, a comedy of manners with a Scotch hero, found favor second only to that of *The West Indian*. *The Fashionable Lover* was acted, at its first appearance, about fifteen times. There were two revivals of the play at Covent Garden, on May 9, 1786, and April 9, 1808. A performance followed on December 8, 1808, at Bath, and a revival occurred at Drury Lane in 1818, seven years after the author's death. Cumberland was partial to *The Fashionable Lover*, and openly prefers it in the Prologue to either *The Brothers* or *The West Indian*, saying to the audience:

Two you have reared; but between you and me,
This youngest is the fav'rite of the three.

"I confess," Cumberland says in the *Memoirs*, "I flattered myself that I had outgone *The West Indian* in point of composition."

The Note of Hand,⁷ a farce, was acted at Drury Lane on February 9, 1774, and later on October 19, at the same theatre,

Comedy called *The Brothers*, is written by — Cumberland; who possesses a considerable post in the Treasury, and is the author of a tragedy called, *The Banishment of Cicero*, and a musical Comedy, entitled *The Summer's Tale*."

Further comment upon *The Brothers* may be found in *The Weekly Magazine* of December 14, and December 21, 1769, *Scot's Magazine* for December, 1769, Boaden, *Life of Mrs. Jordan*, II, 106, Mrs. Inchbald, *The British Theatre*, p. 18.

For American productions of *The Brothers*, see Seilhamer, *History of the American Theatre*, 1749-1774, I, 330 (sometimes named *The Shipwreck*).

⁷ *The London Magazine*, February, 1774. See also *The Oxford Magazine*, February, 1774. Further comment upon *The Note of Hand* may be found in *The Sentimental Magazine* for February, 1774, *The Westminster Magazine* for February, 1774, *The London Chronicle* of February 10, 1774, *Memoirs*, I, 388, Mudford, *Life of Cumberland*, p. 318, and *Private Correspondence of David Garrick*, I, 621, Doctor Hoadly to Garrick, April 10, 1774.

The Election, "the production of a hasty hour."⁸ "Considered as a literary composition," says *Lloyd's Evening Post* of October 21, "this interlude is the most execrable we ever met with," but declares that it is timely: "As all Election matter depends upon being well timed than well written, we doubt not it will be a favorite with the audience when it is more perfect in the Performance, as it really has a very good stage effect." *The Election* manifests Cumberland's usual idealistic tendency: "The author flatters himself it breathes throughout that freedom and independency which is ever so grateful to us all tempered with that loyalty and harmony which is so necessary to promote the general happiness."⁹

The Cholerick Man, produced at Drury Lane on December 19, 1774, was another venture of the same year. A character named Old Nightshade bore the brunt of the critics' assaults, and seemed to violate all the decorum of sentimental comedy. Davies denounced him as "a wretch without the least tincture of humanity," and one who was "fit for no place but Bedlam,"¹⁰ and *The St. James Chronicle*, after praising his analogues in the *Adelphi*, *L'École des Maris*, and *The Squire of Alsatia*, almost shouts that he is "a despicable Character, made up of Noise, Nonsense, Outrage, and Madness."¹¹ "We can scarcely recognize," says the dramatic critic of *Lloyd's Evening Post* of December 19, "the nature and humour exhibited in the paternal severity of Terence's Demea in the grim distortions and wild ravings of Old Nightshade." "Nightshade," says Arthur Murphy, ". . . is in one continued rage from beginning to end. The author should have considered that no man lives in a perpetual whirlwind of passion. . . . If Mr. Cumberland," concludes Murphy, "had copied nature, the audience would have had the pleasure resulting from variety; and the fits

⁸ *The Town and Country Magazine*, October, 1774.

⁹ *The Town and Country Magazine*, October, 1774.

Biographia Dramatica says that *The Election* was never printed, but *The Gentleman's Magazine* for January, 1775, contains the following item: "A new musical interlude, called the election, as it is performed at the theatre royal in Drury Lane, 8vo. 6d. Griffin."

Further comment upon *The Election* may be found in *The Universal Magazine* for October, 1774, and *The London Magazine* for October, 1774.

¹⁰ *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick*, II, 273-4.

¹¹ *The St. James Chronicle*, December 22, 1774.

and starts of his angry boy might have helped to retard, and, at times, to forward the main business of the plot."¹²

Young Nightshade, who reminds the reader of Tony Lumpkin, was thought "too knowing and too shrewd,"¹³ at least for a "Country Put;"¹³ Gregory fell below the standard set in *The Squire of Alsatia*; and—alas! for Cumberland's learning!—Young Manlove was reckoned "but a faint copy of the ingenious Æschines."¹³

The Battle of Hastings was finally accepted by Sheridan, it is supposed, only by the grace of Garrick's influence. The hand of the universal mender of plays is apparent upon every page of the tragedy, and, as usual, Cumberland is amusingly busy, revising, and rewriting. We have, at first, Cumberland's sour thanks for Garrick's candid opinion of an epilogue, with the enclosure of another, fortified by a host of apologies, and a conclusion saying that he "wrote it post-haste directly upon reading Garrick's letter." Of the amendments Cumberland writes: "The whole which you recommend is done: Edwina's simile of the Tower (act the first) is made very impassioned; the conclusion of the fourth act was before your criticism came to hand entirely reformed, and I owed the correction to Miss Young's protest against the simile of the lightning;¹⁴ your observation tallying with what I had done was particularly pleasing."¹⁵ The anticipated criticism is characteristic. The letters reflect Sheridan's and Cumberland's uneasiness. "We have as yet had no rehearsal," he writes Garrick, "nor can I tell when we shall. . . . Without some prudence and patience I should never have got the ladies cordially into their business, nor should I not only have avoided a jar with Mr. Smith,¹⁶ but so far have impressed him in my favor as to draw an offer from him (though too late) of taking the part of Edwin."¹⁷ Cumberland

¹² *Life of David Garrick*, II, 108.

¹³ *The St. James Evening Chronicle*, December 22, 1774.

¹⁴ *The Town and Country Magazine* for January, 1778, complains that Cumberland, "a volunteer in the service of his favourite muse Thalia," "aims too much at the sublime, and the gods themselves often were incapable of understanding him."

¹⁵ *Private Correspondence of David Garrick*, II, 283, Cumberland to Garrick, January 4, 1778.

¹⁶ Cumberland writes Garrick: "Mr. Smith has made good my apprehensions, and refused taking any part in my tragedy but that of Edgar."

¹⁷ *Private Correspondence of David Garrick*, II, 283.

wrote Henderson, the actor, concerning the role. On October 25, 1777, Henderson replies to Cumberland: "I am much obliged and honoured by your intelligence respect the *Battle of Hastings*. . . . As soon as I have gone through the Roman Father, which I now have in rehearsals, I shall dedicate my studies to the *Battle*."¹⁸ Early in January Henderson is well established as Edgar, for Cumberland tells Garrick that "Henderson returns Saturday next, and we shall have three practices this week."¹⁹ The success of Henderson in Edgar was dubious, and Cumberland chose to blame his friend rather than the heavy and unnatural character he himself had created. "He did not possess," says the dramatist, "the graces of person or deportment, and that character demanded both; an actor might have been found who with inferior abilities would have been a fitter representative for it."²⁰ "I am not surprised," writes J. H. Pye, in regard to the failure of this actor in *The Battle of Hastings*, "at the fate of Henderson."²¹ The first performance of *The Battle of Hastings* was on January 24, 1778. It was acted twelve times.²²

During the same year in which *The Battle of Hastings* was acted, Cumberland produced *The Princess of Parma*, a tragedy. This play was acted privately, on October 20 and October 21, 1778, in Mr. Hanbury's theatre at Kelmarsh, Northamptonshire. Cumberland himself was one of the *dramatis personæ*.

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¹⁸ *Letters and Poems by the late Mr. John Henderson*, p. 293, Henderson to Cumberland, October 25, 1777.

¹⁹ *Private Correspondence of David Garrick*, II, 285, Cumberland to Garrick, Monday evening (probably February 5, 1778).

²⁰ *Memoirs*, I, 391.

²¹ *Private Correspondence of David Garrick*, II, 291, J. H. Pye to Garrick, February 21, 1778.

²² Genest, VI, 6-8. See *Ibid.*, VI, 6, for a comparison of *The Battle of Hastings* with Boyce's *Harold*. Further comment upon this play may be found in *Lloyd's Evening Post* of January 26, 1778, *The London Chronicle* of January 25, 1778, *Biographia Dramatica*, III, 51, and Mudford, *Life of Cumberland*, p. 320.